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## AMERICUS VESPUCIUS AND THE NAMING OF AMERICA.<sup>1</sup>

The name of America, as applied to this continent, may be considered as irrevocably fixed, but for a very long period, and up to the present time, a certain amount of obloquy has attached to the name of Americus Vespucius, as though he had fraudulently and surreptitiously robbed another greater and better man of the honor and fame to which he was legitimately entitled.

With the recognized claim of Columbus as the first discoverer of America in 1492, and with the fullest knowledge of all the details of his voyages spread broadcast throughout Europe at the time, it has always seemed a mystery to many how the name of Americus Vespucius should at first have been given, and have become permanently attached to the whole of the great continent of which clearly he was not the discoverer.

Many writers have not hesitated to ascribe to intrigue, falsification, and gross mendacity, a circumstance for which they could find no other theory, although so far as contemporary evidence exists, there seems no cause for regarding Americus Vespucius as other than an intelligent and honorable man, and there is certainly nothing to show that he himself had any part in affixing his name to America other than his having written to a friend an interesting account of his own voyages. It is quite important and interesting, therefore, to ascertain as far as possible how America came to be thus named, and to relieve the memory of the Florentine navigator of the opprobrium which has so long rested upon his name. This we think has been practically done by the valuable work of Mr. John Fiske upon the *Discovery of America* (already reviewed in these pages;) but mistaken notions upon the subject are so widespread

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<sup>1</sup> *Discovery of America*, by John Fiske; 2 vols. Boston, 1892.

that it seems proper to recapitulate in a short article the main points bearing upon the question.

It is very difficult to place ourselves now in the condition of the inhabitants of Europe in the fifteenth century with regard to geographical information. We cannot look backward and realize that, although for at least two thousand years expeditions and explorations had been made and records kept, so that they supposed they knew practically all that was to be known as to the earth on which they lived, yet the sum of their whole knowledge was that the Atlantic lay to the west of them, Asia to the east, frozen regions to the north, and a barbarous country south of the Mediterranean to unknown limits, all else being supposed to be water. No progress in geographical knowledge, except some travels in the East, seems to have been made after the fall of the Roman Empire. Indeed what was before known seems to have been largely forgotten, and at the beginning of the fourteenth century the most learned knew but little, and the people generally hardly anything outside of their own country. The most intelligent cosmographers, because of larger opportunities, were the navigators.

Ptolemy's early map embraced about all that was known even in the fourteenth century. Renewed intercourse with the East had given those interested in commerce some idea of India and vague ideas of China, known by them as Cathay, and of Japan, called Cipango. Travellers had penetrated China and knew that it was bounded by an ocean on the east and by the sea on the south, and that somewhere beyond lay Cipango. They knew that Asia lay north of the equator, and that Africa extended southward towards it, how far they knew not. Later on, the Portuguese navigators making repeated voyages, timorously creeping along the coast, passed the equator, and ascertained the southern limit of Africa. The spherical form of the earth had been recognized in the days of Ptolemy by the most intelligent and learned, but to the common mind the earth was a scroll laid out flat, bordered by great seas, unknown and impassable.

The problem in view, while Columbus was in Portugal, was how most speedily to reach Asia by sea, or that portion of it which was already known as India. There was no doubt entertained but that Africa could be circumnavigated and India reached by that route, but that involved an immensely long voyage. Was there no shorter way?

Columbus had the main points of the problem clearly fixed in his mind. As the earth was a sphere, one could certainly by going east reach Cathay, and the shores of the sea which lay to the east of it. Taking for granted that Europe, Asia, and Africa constituted all the spherical globe which was not water, the remainder must consist of an ocean intervening between Europe and Asia, and washing the shores of Europe's western and Asia's eastern coast, and consequently, if one sailed west long enough he would of necessity eventually make the eastern coast of Asia, and coasting along its southern shore, reach the rich commerce of India.

The circumference of the earth at the equator had been variously computed at from 20,000 to 28,000 miles. Asia was supposed to extend much further east than it really does, and beyond lay Cipango or Japan, several hundred miles in width. Calculating upon the length of a line drawn around the globe at the twenty-fifth parallel, Columbus figured down the distance between the Canary Islands and the island of Cipango at about 2,500 miles. With this conception of the distance from the Canary Islands to the Asiatic shores in his mind, he was quite prepared to undertake an expedition which should have as its specific purpose the reaching of the orient by a much shorter route than around Africa. It was no scheme of mere discovery that animated Columbus in his efforts to carry out his projected voyage. It was the practical, commercial design of opening up trade with the rich countries of the East.

Had he known that 12,000 miles lay between the shores of Portugal and Japan, he would probably never have considered the expedition as practicable, but on a basis of a

voyage of not over 3,000 miles, occupying at the most perhaps two or three months, the reaching of Cipango and Cathay was clearly feasible. Fortunately, his honest miscalculation of the distance to be traversed enabled him to give assurances of success, which, if he had known the truth, he would not have felt.

Encouraged and equipped on this theory of reaching the East in a reasonable time, he boldly set sail with his little ships and little company, and when he came to the Bahama group at San Salvador he believed he had verified his expectations and had reached Asiatic shores. The other three voyages subsequently accomplished by him were made under the same continued illusion, that the lands he saw were upon the eastern shores of Asia. Of course neither Columbus nor any one else thought of attaching his name to the oldest known portion of the earth, and while various names were given to the islands and headlands discovered, all the region which had been reached was embraced in the general name of "The Indies".

Columbus indeed died without knowing that America was not Asia. His first voyage, in 1492, included the discovery of the Bahama Islands, Cuba, and Hispaniola (Hayti), which he thought was Cipango. His second voyage led him among the Caribbean Islands to Jamaica, and along the southern coast of Cuba to within a hundred miles of its western extremity, and confirmed him in his belief that he was on the shores of Cathay and farther India. His third voyage, in 1498, reached the island of Trinidad, and he saw the coast of South America near the mouth of the Orinoco. His fourth voyage, 1502, carried him to Honduras, but he still thought he was upon the coasts of China. Coasting along the shores of Central America nearly to Darien, and returning to Hispaniola, he was wrecked on the coast of Jamaica, and after many hardships returned to Spain, where he died, in 1506, without having attained any definite knowledge of what countries he had visited.

If we take a modern atlas and leave on it only the

small area visited by Columbus, and eliminate the rest, it will leave but a comparatively small group of islands and a few hundred miles of coast line as the actual results of the four voyages made by Columbus to the Indies.

Let us now turn to Americus Vesputius, the Florentine navigator. He was well educated, of a good family, and had devoted many years to the study of cosmography. He was a skillful pilot and navigator, but was not in command of any of the four voyages made by him to America. His first voyage, 1498, was to the Gulf of Mexico and apparently around Florida, to some point along the coast of Florida or Georgia, and thence to Spain, touching at the Bermudas. His second voyage, 1499, reached some point on the coast of Brazil, extending to Paria and Maracaibo. His third voyage was to the Brazilian coast, extending from  $5^{\circ}$  to  $34^{\circ}$  south of the equator, being the longest exploration of the coast line of America hitherto accomplished. His fourth voyage was to the coast in the vicinity of Darien.

In 1503 Americus wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici giving an account of his voyage and exploration of the coasts of Brazil, speaking of that country as a new world, because, he says, our ancestors had no knowledge of it, and averring that the ancients had no idea of any country south of the equator, but that his voyage had proved the existence of a continent there, well inhabited, etc. This disproved the idea of South America at least being Cathay or India, or indeed any part of Asia. It was literally a new and unknown world. In 1504 a Latin version of this letter was published. It was greatly sought after, and eleven Latin editions and eight German versions of it were published within two years. Maps began to be constructed, and on one of the first Brazil was called the Land of the Holy Cross, then *Novus Mundus*, and *Quarta Pars*.

Bearing these facts in mind, we are not surprised to find in a book compiled by Waldseemüller in 1507, to which this letter of Americus was appended, the following important

passage: "But now these parts have been more extensively explored, and another fourth part has been discovered by Americus Vespucius (as will appear in what follows): wherefore I do not see what is rightly to hinder us from calling it Amerige or America, i. e., the land of Americus, after its discoverer, Americus, a man of sagacious mind, since both Europe and Asia have got their names from women. Its situation and the manners and customs of its people will be clearly understood from the twice two voyages of Americus which follow."<sup>1</sup>

This is the first suggestion known of applying the name America to this continent, and this suggestion referred distinctly to Brazil, or South America, which were regarded as entirely distinct from the countries which Columbus had discovered. On a map attached to a later edition of the same book Brazil was marked as *terra incognita*, and on a globe made at Nuremburg about 1520, the inscription is found on that part of South America between 10° and 20° south latitude "America or Brazilia or land of the Parroquets".<sup>2</sup>

Cabral, the eminent Portuguese navigator, in 1500, having in view only the reaching of India by the circumnavigation of Africa, and going to the westward of his course, unintentionally came upon the coast of Brazil, and gave to the lands he saw the name of Vera Cruz, soon changed to Santa Cruz. The point where he landed was 16° 30' south latitude. Americus Vespucius, in 1501, reached the coast of South America at Cape San Roque, 5° south latitude, and coasted south beyond Rio Janeiro before returning to Spain, and it was the account he gave of the discovery of so large a region, which could only be part of a great continent, and which was so great an enlargement of geographical knowledge that naturally associated his name with the new and great discovery. The earliest known map on which the name of America is marked is attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, about 1514. In this we find a large conti-

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<sup>1</sup> Fiske, II., pp. 136-37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 148.

ment, lying mostly south of the equator, which has the name "America" on it. It was not until about 1540 that America had been sufficiently circumnavigated to establish the fact that it was a distinct continent. On a map made by Mercator in 1541 both North and South America are distinctly outlined, and the name America placed "Ame" on North and "rica" on South America. Americus Vespucius died in 1512, but it appears that his name was not attached to any known map of America earlier than 1514, and then only to the central portion of South America, and it was not until 1541, twenty-nine years after his death, that the name America was attached to the whole continent.

His widely published letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, describing the newly-discovered region which he had visited south of the equator, no doubt associated his name with the new world, so large a part of which he was the first to visit, but certainly there can be no ground of censure upon the great navigator for this. Nor is it, in fact, of much importance. The matured judgment of the world, with a full knowledge of Icelandic voyages, and the successive steps which brought to Europeans a knowledge of the existence and extent of a previously unknown continent has given to Columbus the fame to which he is justly entitled as the projector and master mind that carried theory into practical and bold action, and demonstrated the existence of lands to be reached by a courageous voyage towards the setting sun. Columbus is rightly recognized as the discoverer of America, and it matters not if another's name has been given to this continent, so long as the rightful claim of Columbus is so fully and everywhere recognized.

Those were days of great achievements in the work of opening up a larger knowledge of our habitable earth. Bartholomew Diaz, in 1486, passed around the Cape of Good Hope and some distance up the eastern coast of Africa and returned, after a voyage of over thirteen hundred miles, a wonderful exploit for that day. De Gama, in 1497, made a voyage from Lisbon to Hindostan, returning in 1499. Cab-



ral, in 1497, discovered the coast of South America to the south of the equator, but, being so far east, it was not supposed to have any connection with the countries discovered by Columbus. Americus Vespucius completed the discovery of a large part of the eastern coast of South America in 1501. Balboa first discovered the Pacific ocean from the heights of Panama in 1506, and Magellan, in 1509, discovered and passed through the straits of Magellan, and sailed, more than five thousand miles, to the Phillippine Islands, near the coast of China. These were all great achievements, and the world justly commemorates these great names, for it is no disparagement to the fame of Columbus to give due meed of praise to his contemporaries. Among these Americus Vespucius, the Florentine, Cosmographer and Pilot Major of Spain, deserves recognition, and no opprobrium should rest upon his memory because his name has been accidentally attached to a continent, which he was so greatly instrumental in discovering and making known.

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